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ABSTRACT

In order to determine the reading and television viewing habits of American adults during time spent in waiting rooms, a study observed 100 adults waiting outside the Emergency Treatment Room of John F. Kennedy Hospital in Edison, New Jersey, over a four-week period. Results revealed that more of these adults chose to watch television as an activity than chose to read, supporting the hypothesis that when there is a choice between watching television and reading during time spent waiting, the average American adult will watch television. Underlying this study is the growing concern expressed by various social commentators that aliteracy (the phenomenon of people who can but do not read) has replaced illiteracy as the major threat to American society. This problem is addressed in the second half of this paper, which provides a review of the literature concerning American reading and television watching habits, the reasons behind them, and the characteristics of the groups involved. (Twenty references are appended.) (MM)

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Reading and Television Viewing Habits of American Adults During Time Spent in Waiting Rooms

by

Sharon L. Spirn

Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Master of Arts Degree
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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to establish information concerning the reading and television viewing habits of American adults during time spent in waiting rooms.

Over a period of four weeks, 100 adults were observed to determine if they watched television or read while waiting outside the Emergency Treatment Room of John F. Kennedy Hospital in Edison, N.J.

Results reveal that more American adults in this study watched television as an activity than those choosing to read. This finding supports the hypothesis that when there is a choice of watching television or reading during time spent waiting, the average American adult will choose to watch television.

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In 1984, the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research held a conference in Washington, D.C., where they addressed the problem of aliteracy and its significance in our society. "In a democracy," they said, "it is critical that its citizens read and think before making important decisions." According to the participants in this conference, aliteracy has already replaced illiteracy as the major threat to our society and is reaching epidemic proportions. There is a growing concern that many people are reading less, and in some cases, not reading at all.

William J. Baroody, Jr. (1984), president of the American Enterprise Institute, estimates that 25 million adult Americans cannot read well enough to negotiate the daily business of life: they are functional illiterates. In contrast, aliterates are people who can read, but don't. Baroody says, "Aliterates scan magazines by looking at the pictures, do not read beyond the headlines on the front page of the newspaper, and never read novels or poetry for the pleasure they may offer."

Nick Thimmesch (1984), another participant in the conference, cites television as the ready explanation for the phenomenomenon of aliteracy. By age 15, the average American child has spent more time in front of a television set than in the classroom or in doing homework.

Others feel that it is too simplistic to cast television as the villian. Robert M. Wilson (1984) notes that television news claims as many viewers as this nation's 1,710 newspapers have readers. Also, more people get their news from television than from any other information source. Television news is expanding while newspaper circulation remains static or is declining. One reason for this, argues Wilson, is that "people cannot read and absorb the news in detail and then have a positive attitude at work."

Does aliteracy pose a danger to society? Barbara Decker (1985), in a paper entitled, "Aliteracy: What Teachers Can Do to Keep Johnny Reading", hypothesizes that a disinclination to read is resulting in people who are allowing others to do their thinking and decision-making for them. Decker found that when people who can read avoid the act of reading their skills actually diminish. In the end, these people may even lose the ability to read with understanding.

Townsend Hoopes (1984), former president of the Association of American Publishers, sees the failure of the schools to insist on high standards of reading, writing, and spelling as leading to a decline in all three. This decline, in turn, produces succeeding generations who are functionally literate or illiterate. He feels that this is a process that feeds on itself,

producing a ruinous downward spiral.

Idealistically, if our country is to remain a strong and viable democracy, reading and thinking before decision-making must be practiced by more of its citizens. People have to use their reading skills to question, challenge, understand, disagree and agree with the issues of the day. Aliteracy threatens this process.

The extent to which adults choose one activity over another is not known; assumptions have been made and little evidence on the reading versus viewing habits of adults is reported in the literature.

HYPOTHESIS

To provide additional evidence on this topic the following study was conducted. It was hypothesized that when there is a choice of watching television or reading during time spent waiting, the average American adult will choose to watch television.

DEFINITIONS

An aliterate for the purposes of this study is defined as one who has the ability to read, but is unwilling to do so. A functionally literate person is one who can read and write well enough to fill out forms,

read the newspaper, or follow written directions. These are individuals who have minimal reading skills. An illiterate person is one who cannot read newspapers, warning signs, directions, labels on prescription drugs or street signs.

PROCEDURES

Permission was granted by John F. Kennedy Hospital in Edison, N.J., to observe adults waiting outside the Emergency Treatment Room. Over a period of four weeks, 100 adults were observed to determine if they watched television or read while waiting. Each adult was observed for 20 minutes and the results were recorded.

RESULTS

On Tuesday morning, December 1, 1987, 12 adults were observed in the waiting room outside of the Emergency Treatment Room of John F. Kennedy Hospital in Edison, N.J. Three adults read either books or magazines, 2 adults watched television, and 7 adults appeared to be engaged in other activities such as talking, napping, staring into space, and knitting.

On Tuesday afternoon, 14 adults were observed. Four adults appeared to be reading, 4 watched television,

1 appeared to be reading and watching television at the same time, and 5 were engeged in other activities.

On Tuesday morning, December 8, 1987, 11 adults were observed. Two read, 5 watched television, and 4 engaged in other activities such as working on a cross-word puzzle, talking, and playing with a baby.

In the afternoon, 17 adults were observed. Three read, 6 watched television, 1 read and watched television at the same time, and 7 engaged in other activities.

On Tuesday morning, December 15, 1987, 15 adults were observed. Two adults read, 4 watched television, 1 adult appeared to be doing both at the same time and 8adults engaged in other activities.

In the afternoon, 18 adults were observed. Three read, six watched television, 2 appeared to be doing both, and 7 engaged in other activities such as talking, pacing, sleeping, eating, and filing their nails.

On Tuesday morning, December 22, 1987, 13 adults were observed. Four read, 3 watched television, and 6 appeared to be engaged in other activities.

During this period of observation, 7 adults brought books with them to read while waiting outside the Emergency Treatment Room, showing an intent to read. The other 14 adults who read during time spent waiting chose magazines such as People, Time, Newsweek, McCall's, New York, Journal, and Reader's Digest which were placed

on a rack for anyone to read who cared to.

The total results for this four week period were:

Reading----------21

Watching T.V.----------30

Reading and Watching T.V.----------5

Other----------44

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study indicated that in this sample, more American adults watched television as an activity, than those choosing to read. This finding supports the hypothesis that when there is a choice of watching television or reading during time spent waiting, the average American adult will choose to watch television.

As the results showed, 30 adults watched television, while 21 adults read. This could be because, as Paul Levinson pointed out, television is easy to watch. "...and if its content does not always provide viewers with much to think about, television does not ask much of them either: they may eat, sleep, and unwind in front of it, observing the best and worst life has to offer with emotionally safe detachment."

Or do these results mirror the same phenomena observed by Ron Tanner at the University of Wisconsin in

1987? Once his students were out of school, if they did not have to read, they would not. As they indicated to him, "Why read any more than we have to?"

If aliteracy is a growing problem in the United States, further research is needed to investigate the causes contributing to it and ways of preventing it.

Reading and Television Viewing Habits of American Adults During Time Spent in Waiting Rooms: Related Literature

Not much research exists on the reading and/or television viewing habits of the American adult, and what is available appears to be contradictory.

Mikulecky (1978), in a paper entitled, Aliteracy and a Changing View of Reading Goals, presented at the International Reading Association Convention in Houston, Texas, revealed that as indicated in a 1969 Gallup poll, 58 percent of adult Americans claim to have "never read, never finished" a book. In a response to this report that these adults are too busy to read books and must be reading magazines instead, it was found in a 1973 random survey that only 26 percent of American adults seem to be reading magazines. Of the 5,000 adults surveyed, most seemed to read on the job. But, even that was minimal---only 1 hour and 46 minutes daily, during the week. Also, men engaged in more job-related reading than did women. Contrasted with that are countries like Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and Germany where the percentage of citizens reading books is from two to three times greater than the percentage of U.S. citizens reading books.

Mikulecky, in a survey done in 1978 found that little reading is done even in school. Positive reading habits seemed to deteriorate the longer a student stayed in school. Twenty-five percent of 100 randomly surveyed students reported summer reading of less than

10 minutes a day. During the school year more reading was done (66.9 minutes), but nearly 80 percent of that time was devoted to reading homework assignments.

Ron Tanner (1987) reported in a position paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Teaching Freshmen Non-readers, the A-literate Majority, that most of the college students that he has taught see no place in their lives for reading as an opportunity for intellectual or emotional stimulation, growth, or enjoyment. "They see no place in their lives for any but the most utilitarian kind of reading---the kind that enables them to make sense of road signs, say, or appliance instructions." Most felt that they didn't have to read literature because they could watch the same stories on television. Once they graduated from college and its required reading courses, these students told Tanner that the only things they expected to read were office memos and maybe newspapers.

Hoopes (1984) discusses the failure of the schools to insist on high standards of reading, writing, and spelling as leading to a decline in all three. This state, in turn, leads to a downward spiral that feeds on itself, producing people who are functionally literate.

A possible explanation of aliteracy is given by Wilson (1984) who suggests that when schools focus on

subskills instead of on the global reading act, it robs some people of their enjoyment of reading.

In a paper reviewing the literature on the habits and preferences of American adults in for areas: reading, library use, television viewing, and adult learning, Mildred DeKoff (1982) found that a book reader is most likely to be female, under the age of 49, at least a high school graduate with some college education, married, employed full or part-time, and involved in service and professional organizations.

On the other hand, the non-book reader is more likely to be male, have a high school education or less, be unemployed or retired, and have fewer children.

It was noted in most of the surveys and articles that reading for pleasure was listed most often as the primary motivation by women and book readers. Men and non-book readers read most often for general knowledge---to become better informed.

Other reasons given for reading were relaxation, to obtain knowledge for work or career, as a time filler, for religious or spiritual reasons, to escape, to fulfill educational requirements, to be able to discuss current events and for self-improvement.

DeKoff used Frank and Greenberg's book, The Public's Use of Television, (1980) for information on who watches television and what types of programs are watched.

Those adults who watched television pursued this activity mostly during the week as a relaxing, leisure time amusement. They spent their weekend time on other activities. These people indicated that they watched television for relaxation, because it is a habit, for companionship, to see a particular program or to gain information. DeKoff reported that book readers tend to watch television on an average of 15 hours per week, non-book readers 16 hours per week and non-readers 24 hours per week.

Duncan and Goggin (1984) found that active, lifelong readers started reading early in life with the support and guidance of family menbers. They also were articulate, alert, and mentally active.

Kathleen Ngandu (1984) surveyed 101 older adults, Their reading activities occupied 2.5 hours of an average day, while their television viewing time averaged 2.4 hours. The results of the survey showed that the elderly enjoyed reading and that they most frequently read newspapers and magazines. Their best sources of materials seemed to be subscriptions, churches, friends, and senior centers. Their top reading interests were religion and news and their main motivations for reading were enjoyment and information. The elderly favored news and public affairs programs when watching television.

According to Ann Haase (1980) who did a study analyzing and comparing the reading interests of 57 adults

from three educational levels, most adults tended to read between one and three magazines regularly and were interested in current events. A significant portion of each group read a newspaper every day, with each group favoring the front page. As the educational level of the adults increased, they read a greater quantity as well as a greater variety of material.

Haase also queried these adults on the types of television programs and movies they watched. Most of the adults said that they went to a movie regularly for entertainment, escape, and to watch a good story. They watched television primarily for infomation and entertainment.

In a paper entitled, Finding the Road to Lifelong Reading, Matheny (1986) found in interviews with 60 adult readers that beginning reading and liking to read occurred first in the family. When the family had a strong positive influence on developing literacy, the school had relatively little effect on the student's reading attitudes. However, when the home had a negative impact on the student's reading attitudes, the school then had the opportunity to influence attitudes.

In 1970, a national survey of the reading activities of 5,096 American adults was conducted to learn about their reading habits. As reported by Richard T. Murphy (1970), the average person reads for almost two hours a

day. Most of this time is spent on reading newspapers, magazines, books, and job-related material. Five percent of all adults can't read in the English language. These people include the visually handicapped, foreign language readers, and illiterates. A person's soio-economic status was found to be related to his reading habits. People of a high socio-economic status tend to read more of all kinds of printed matter than those of low socio-economic status. Nonreaders would like to read, but are unable to do so and must frequently depend on others to read to them.

Reading was also found by Murphy to be an integral part of other activities and not an isolated act by an individual. Reading was done of street or traffic signs while traveling; price, weight, or size information while shopping, and manuals or any written instructions while at work.

Guthrie (1982) examined the roles of reading in a community of 109 adult wage earners from 4 occupation groups. In the community that was surveyed, the typical person read over 2½ hours per day. The largest volume of reading was oriented to Brief Documents. The second highest volume of content was News and Business---17 minutes per day; Reference---11.3 minutes; Fiction---7.4 minutes; Sports and Recreation---4.1 minutes.

Lipschultz (1986) noted that previous research on avoidance failed to explain adequately the forces behind reading or not reading. In his study of 408 newspaper readers and non-readers, most non-readers found reading a newspaper too time consuming and of little interest to their daily life. Also, most newspaper news had already been heard from other media. The groups used a three-point scale to rate 12 avoidance statements concerning newspaper reading. Overall, nonreaders agreed with significantly higher levels to these avoidance statements. Nonreaders tendedto have only a high school education or less.

In 1981, Mary Vieth, a student at Kean College of New Jersey, conducted a study to determine whether teachers spent more time reading or watching television. This study was predicated on the assumption that if teachers are to have a positive influence on the reading and television viewing habits of their students it is important for them to be aware of their own reading and viewing habits. Nineteen out of the 56 teachers sampled qualified as nonreaders (they read less than one hour a day) and 20 qualified as nonviewers (they watched television less than one hour per day). The group as a whole watched television only five minutes a week longer than they spent reading during that same period.

Are people who abstain from television more involved

in society than viewers because they have more time for themselves, their families, their careers and their community? Are moderate and heavy viewers better off than television abstainers, since television provides them with news and other useful information? Or are viewers and nonviewers basically the same except for their choice of pastimes? These questions were posed by Jackson-Beeck and Jeff Sobal (1979) who classified adult television viewers into three categories according to the number of hours they watched television each day. Viewers---six hours daily, and nonviewers, not at all.

A majority of heavy viewers did not complete high school and seemed to be either at home or employed as laborers, service workers, or equipment operators. Viewers and nonviewers seemed to have similar occupations, although nonviewers were slightly more involved in professional or technical work. Nonviewers were about as active as viewers inclub activities even though they had more time to participate. The greatest difference between viewers and nonviewers lay in their family structure. Nonviewers were significantly more likely to be single or married and childless. Nonviewers seemed to be better educated and about as well integrated and active as average viewers.

Are the reading habits of American adults changing? John P. Robinson and Leo W. Jeffres (1979) point out that

between 1959 and 1975, television replace newspapers as the public's major source of news. To examine this trend further, 1,519 adults were sampled for their use of television news and newspapers. Older people dramatically increased their amount of viewing time. This can be attributed in part to television being more adept than print sources at providing news and other information geared to audience needs and expectations. Increased television viewing was also found for younger adults. However, these younger adults also gave evidence of a "tradeoff" between newspapers and more specialized media (magazines and books). But the increases in book and magazine reading were not sufficient to offset the decline in newspaper reading. Television news appears to have made inroads on newspaper reading habits and has made newspaper reading a less prominent feature of people's daily lives.

Ron Kubey (1978) in Mood States and Television Viewing in Adults, a paper presented at the 31st Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society in Dallas, Texas, studied 104 adult workers aged 18-63 to see what impact television viewing had on their moods. These subjects indicated their activity, mood state, and other data in response to each of 45 electronic radio signals over a period of one week. The results confirmed that most people felt very relaxed and passive while

watching television. This may be because the "work" of attention required for many other daily activities (work, driving, cooking, reading) is not necessary for the viewing of television. Furthermore, almost all of the subjects felt quite "trusting" and "unsuspicious" when watching television because they felt that television provided safe and nonthreatening companionship. These "good" feelings counterbalanced the feelings that heavy viewers had of "hostility" and "suspiciousness" in many of their other daily activities. Kubey concluded that avid television watching, especialy among the elderly, could promote or reinforce isolation and passivity.

Finally, Paul Levinson (1980), in The Benefits of Watching Television, states that the unfounded and sometimes absurd attacks on television have tended to obscure many of the media's obvious personal, social, and aesthetic benefits. Television is easy to watch, the programing is diverse, and it requires only a one-time cost involvement in contrast to movies and books, the cost for which must be renewed everytime. Television can be instructive and critical viewing skills are teachable.

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